

The 9/11 Memorial: Self and Identity, Space and Place

In the words of Dr. Billie Pivnick, psychologist and professor at Columbia Teacher's College, "Symbolic destruction requires symbolic restitution" (500). Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, it was *required* for the site of destruction to transform into one of remembrance. Memorializing is a collective activity; one that can only take place when the public holds collective memories and shared grief (Pivnick 500). It is a process that holds significance not only in the development of national or group identities, but also individual perceptions, values, and beliefs. The 9/11 Memorial, therefore, is a site that exemplifies both American self and identity. Moreover, the 9/11 Memorial dictates forms of mourning that reinforce America's historical narrative of the U.S.'s relationship with the Middle East and Orientalist perceptions of Muslims and Arabs. Through a content analysis of the 9/11 Memorial website and 9/11 Memorial Lesson Plans, this paper will highlight the political and social representations embedded in the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, and how they affect American society today.

In 2005, the National September 11 Memorial and Museum at the World Trade Center Foundation, Inc. began working with the Lower Manhattan Development Cooperation and The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to construct a memorial and museum at the site of the former Twin Towers ("About Us"). With over 16 million people from around the world experiencing the 9/11 Memorial since its opening in 2011,¹ it is undoubtedly a structure that embodies this transformative moment in American awareness of the Middle East and projects to foreign visitors a nationalized account of the event ("About the Memorial").

¹ The Memorial is indeed a full experience, encompassing viewers through the use of sound, space, and stark contrast (Hess and Herbig).

As Theresa Donofrio explains, those with control over space have the ability to determine “place”—that is, a space with a particular meaning or significance (151-152). Memorialization is a matter of expressing humanity and agency. Who can memorialize, or what can be memorialized, is in the current period a political question. The prominence and grandiosity of the 9/11 Memorial, not to mention its foundation’s \$60 million operating budget, makes evident where power resides in America (“Facts and Figures”). The political gravity this site holds is elucidated by the fact that there is no such memorial for Iraqi or Afghani war victims, or Muslim American victims of hate crimes, anywhere in the U.S. (Simpson 8). Additionally, there have been a number of controversies regarding who is allowed to remember their dead at the 9/11 Memorial (Sacirbey, Pilgrim).

In May of 2014, a Memorial Museum was built adjacent to the former Twin Towers as a supplement to the Memorial waterfall pools. Its website describes the Museum as being, “the country's principal institution concerned with exploring the implications of the events of 9/11, documenting the impact of those events and exploring 9/11's continuing significance” (“About the Museum”). In this case, 9/11’s continuing significance is not simply the tragic loss of the victims, but the barbarism of al-Qaeda and Islamic radicals. As Philip Kennicott explains, the 9/11 Memorial Museum is not for the purpose of historical education as much as it is for the ritualization of grief and nationalism. He writes,

Striving for catharsis and epiphany, they have created an oversized pit of self-pity, patriotic self-glorification and voyeurism, where visitors are allowed to feel personally touched by the deaths of people they didn't know; where they can revel for a few hours in righteous grievance; where they repeat the pieties of our unresolved, pop-psych ideas about death and remembrance and rebirth and renewal. And maybe indulge thoughts of vengeance. (4)

Though the memorial reflection pools themselves may not convey a particular historical narrative, they produce behaviors and performances of memorialization which complement and reinforce perspectives circulated within the Museum.

A nationalized memorial is not just a site but a symbol of power—the power to produce knowledge. Though the Memorial itself may not have a direct impact on the knowledge of citizens, it is important to note that the National September 11 Foundation does have a number of educational programs and provides educators with instructional materials to teach students about 9/11. The 9/11 Memorial website offers downloadable lesson plans, podcasts, and primary sources for teachers of all grade levels. The majority of ninth through twelfth grade lesson plans offered focus on survivor and rescue team stories. Others address the history of the World Trade Center and the creation of the Memorial.

There are only two lessons that fall in an outlier category: “Islamist Extremism in the Last 20 Years” and “Exploring Afghani Culture Through Literature” (“Lesson Plans 9-12”). While the first lesson includes a brief notice to “remind students that all terrorists aren’t members of al-Qaeda nor are all terrorists of Muslim background,” the focus of the lesson is to outline the goals and means of terrorist organizations (“Islamist Extremism”). The second lesson sounds more promising, though understanding the role of colonialism in shaping Afghani culture is overshadowed by an analysis of the role of women in Afghani society (“Exploring Afghani Culture”). Though it is not necessarily harmful to educate students on issues of culture and Middle Eastern societies, it does seem harmful to do so when it is in the context of 9/11 and in relation to the idea of terrorism.

The rhetoric in the “Islamist Extremism” lesson is repeated in the 9/11 Memorial Museum. It is mentioned that not all Muslims are terrorists, not all Arabs are extremists, and so forth (“Islamist Extremism” 2). Yet the fatal flaw of the National 9/11 Foundation and all

of its related projects is that it never presents who Muslims and Arabs *are*. One can know that they are not all terrorists and they are not all extremists, but what does that make them? Less barbarous perhaps, but not exactly humane or worthy of respect. The attempt of the Memorial Museum to avoid stereotypes and generalizations—while honorable—does nothing to deconstruct the images of Arabs as primitive and violent that have existed in our culture for over a century (Said, Semmerling).

Whereas typical forms of crime produce a victim-perpetrator divide, terrorism has introduced a new extreme. In America, a terrorist is the ultimate perpetrator and Americans the ultimate victims. This in-group and out-group formation has furthered the development of American identity as liberal,² patriotic, just, and civil; and an image of an out-group which is not. The 9/11 Memorial Museum reflects America's claiming of victimhood, and failure to understand or even research the positions of the Other. This reality is evident through the rise in discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims (or anyone appearing to be Middle Eastern) after 9/11 ("FBI: Bias Crimes Against Muslims Remain at High Levels") (Figueroa 468). Such cases of misplaced aggression are clear results of a false interpretation of the historical, political, and cultural causes of 9/11 and terrorism at large.

A poignant example of this is the "FAQ about 9/11" page on the 9/11 Memorial website. Besides questions like "What is the 9/11 Memorial?" and "What were the Twin Towers?" is the question "What is Islam?". Its answer describes the world's second-largest religion as being based on God's final revelation and the Prophet Mohammed's life and actions ("FAQ about 9/11"). Under the answer to the question, "What is an Islamist Extremist?" it says that, "they believe that strict adherence to religious law should be the sole

² In Lockean terms, not in relation to modern American political parties.

basis for a country's law, as well as its cultural and social life. While some Muslims believe this, many do not.”

The first question to be asked is why, if some Muslims believe this but many do not, is the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the founding of Islam being discussed at all? Many leaders of the Islamic community are offended by the mention of Islam at the 9/11 Memorial and Museum, as they view al-Qaeda as people who have distorted teachings of Islam for political ends, not actual Muslims (Kaplan, O'Connor, and Hutchinson). Secondly, why does this passage use vague language in discussing the amount of Muslims who are not extremists? According to a Gallup poll in 2006, only 7% of Muslims across ten countries surveyed have “radical” ideologies (Mogahed 1). Yet they have chosen the word “many” when it is in fact a majority—an overwhelming, 93% majority—that are not extremists. Lastly, why is their definition of an Islamist extremist based on an adherence to Islamic law? al-Qaeda does not advocate for what is officially recognized as Islamic law, despite what they may pronounce, but follow an ideology in which they have the ultimate authority to decide who deserves to be killed, and who has the right to do the killing.³ Their misinterpretation (and/or complete deformation) of Islamic law should be criminalized, not Islamic law itself.

Yet, much of the criticism surrounding the Memorial and Memorial Museum is not focused on what it includes as much as what it does not. Admittedly, flaws will always be found when taking this approach. However, for an institution that promotes itself as being educational and informative, the content it chooses to ignore is far more likely to be intentional and consequential in the creation of a historical narrative. The Museum does not position the conflict in a history spanning long before (and after) 2001. It does not discuss the

³ This differs from the teachings of Islam, in which only Allah has the authority to make such decisions (bin Bayyah).

political consequences of 9/11 affecting Americans, such as enhanced surveillance, racial profiling, and security policies. It does not discuss the amount of American tax dollars that have been spent to support two wars overseas, the torture and prison camps associated with them, and the shocking death toll they are responsible for (at the very least, 174,000 civilians compared to 9/11's 2,977) ("Civilians Killed and Wounded") ("September 11 Fast Facts"). It does not discuss the infamous al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's motivation behind the attacks, as expressed in speeches published online, which cite eighty years of oppression in the Middle East as the reason behind their offensive—not, as President Bush has stated, a contempt for freedom ("Text of Bush and bin Laden Speeches").

The reality of the matter is, most Americans have no idea what eighty years of oppression bin Laden is talking about. This fact requires us to question where Americans are receiving information about 9/11, and why their understanding of the conflict is limited to a singular event. The Museum illuminates the conflict that exists in memorializing an event as recent as 9/11. Given that society is still experiencing and uncovering its effects, the event cannot be captured through static representation. However, such a problem only highlights the lack of accurate information about al-Qaeda and the Middle East circulating in the American public sphere. No memorial or museum should have the sole responsibility of educating the public on the entirety of an event with such a complex history. Yet in the case of 9/11, with little ongoing public dialogue situating the event in its context, the 9/11 Memorial has been charged with this impossible task of representation.

Understanding the representation of 9/11 in American society begs the question: can Americans be patriotic *and* acknowledge their country's past failures in political intervention? The answer is: we have never had a chance to find out. Institutions like the 9/11 Memorial and Memorial Museum keep America's involvement in the Middle East hidden, or

frame it as a necessary evil only conducted after 9/11 for the sake of finding terrorists (“FAQ about 9/11”). A failure to understand Islamic societies, the causes of terrorism, and the nature of U.S. foreign policy has resulted in a hostile environment for Arabs in the U.S., and has undermined our ability to act as informed members of a democracy. For true democracy, and perhaps even patriotism, only exists when citizens are both supporters and critics of their country.

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